

Open Doors

Everyone there lined up across the center of the vast room. We were told, "If a statement applies to you, take one step forward; if it does not apply take one step backwards." With that the session began; the official stated, "You consider yourself unique." I stepped forward. "You have a family member others would consider different." I stepped backwards. "You have been treated differently for something out of your control." I stepped forward. "You have or you know someone with a disability." I stepped forward. When they were finished with the several dozen statements, I and a few others were at the front of the room, and all but one of my immediate friends were at the other end. I don't know who was more surprised, them or me, but I do know it was a valuable lesson. It revealed the social mask worn by all of us, exposing more than meets the eye. Because I am outspoken, I had been hand chosen by the school councilors to act as a group leader for **Unitown**, a workshop to empower students by illuminating prejudice, bias, and inequality found in our school and community. I went largely to get out of a day of classes, but it turned out to be an awesome experience. It inspired me, and seven of my friends to create a club within our school that would carry on where the workshop left off, a Diversity Club. Our first sponsored event was, Diversity Roundtable; a discussion on Disability Awareness hosted by K.C. Harmony. The presentations and activities made us even more aware of the importance of inclusion.

"Inclusion is a sense of belonging: feeling respected, valued for who you are; feeling a level of supportive energy and commitment from others so that you can do your best work."¹ "We ALL need to find connection with the struggle for equity and respect for ALL people. Take ownership, and work to create a more understanding and supportive world."² Huge advances have been made in "accessible design," the removal of the architectural barriers that limit

accessibility to *places*, for those with limited mobility. However, I feel removing barriers between *people* is far more important. The surge in technology and electronics has enhanced communications enormously. Yet, even with that in mind, still more needs to be done. I propose we need legislation or a Presidential Mandate calling for Braille and American Sign Language to be required of all students from their earliest education through completion of Middle School. Based on the principle that *once you learn to ride a bike you never forget how*; if later on, one were to lose their sight or hearing, recovery would be hastened by a review of these skills, rather than having to begin from square one and being largely removed from communication until mastery comes. But much more importantly, beginning with one or two graduations, these alternative means of communication would soon be in everyone's vocabulary, removing some of the disability from blindness and deafness, and bringing that population closer to inclusion. Broadening communication would improve employability and living conditions; access to health care, education, technology and leisure opportunities; and empower participation in society overall. "A genuinely inclusive society requires the recognition and acceptance of disability as a reality and provides the necessary support structures that would enable all people to be fully integrated into society."³ "Civilization is the process in which one gradually increases the number of people included in the term 'we' or 'us' and at the same time decreases those labeled 'you' or 'them' until that category has no one left in it."⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamt "of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality."⁵ As Discrimination Law makes more and more progress, this becomes closer and closer to a reality. Perhaps, at this point in my life, such a lofty endeavor remains out of my immediate reach; but I do feel participation in Diversity club has already made improvements within our school and community by making everyone there more aware. And as I continue my education and work

towards my Juris Doctor, I will become better able to proliferate these ideals.

I am of the opinion that all people are born with disabilities; some are not readily apparent, some are more social accepted and some are more easily overcome, but all of them are part of what makes us individual. "A community's vitality is derived from the inclusion of different views, philosophies and experiences which generates creative thinking, ideas and results"⁶ People with disabilities do not have limited capabilities, if anything their experiences often times make them more insightful and their restrictions force them to become more creative, divergent thinkers to overcome the limitations they must cope with regularly. The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.⁷ Helen Keller once said. "When one door... closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."⁸ So, "Let's open doors and minds. Let's throw a spotlight on the richness that people who are different bring to mainstream society. Let's talk about assets instead of liabilities,"⁹ continue to work on accessibility instead of deniability, begin to focus on capabilities instead of disabilities, and continue to push to open opportunities.

Endnotes

¹ Miller, Frederick A. and Katz, Judith H. 2002. *The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Real Power of Diversity*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers

² Wilkins, Daniel D. Wilkins. *TheNthdegree*. homepage. 2004. 24 Feb.2009 < <http://www.thenthdegree.com/aboutus.asp>>.

³ RosenBerg, Ed. "INCLUSION QUOTES '07.' *Everyone is Included All People, All Places...All Ways*. Esther Williams. 25 Feb. 2009 <<http://everyoneisincluded.us/index.html>>.

⁴ Johnson Lewis, Jone. "Inclusion Quotes." *Inclusion Quotes From Wisdom Quotes: Quotations to inspire and challenge*. Howard Winters. © 1995-2009. 25 Feb. 2009 <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_inclusion.html>.

⁵ Ibid. Martin Luther King Jr.

⁶ RosenBerg, Ed. "INCLUSION QUOTES '07.' *Everyone is Included All People, All Places...All Ways*. Bob Jones, President and CEO, Old National Bancorp. 25 Feb. 2009 <<http://everyoneisincluded.us/index.html>>.

⁷ Johnson Lewis, Jone. "Opportunity Quotes." *Opportunity Quotes From Wisdom Quotes: Quotations to inspire and challenge*. Winston Churchill. © 1995-2009. 25 Feb. 2009 <http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_inclusion.html>.

⁸ Ibid. Helen Keller.

⁹ RosenBerg, Ed. "INCLUSION QUOTES '07.' *Everyone is Included All People, All Places...All Ways*. Helen Henderson, Columnist, Toronto Star. 25 Feb. 2009 <<http://everyoneisincluded.us/index.html>>.